


MATTHEWS, William T.

DRAWER 19A

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Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

William T. Matthews

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

LINCOLN PORTRAIT RESTS IN CELLAR

Almost Forgotten, Matthews
Painting Tells Tale of
Poverty

Covered with dust and almost forgotten, a life-size painting of Abraham Lincoln is lying in a cellar at 414 Ninth street northwest. The portrait, which was painted by William T. Matthews, once hung in the White House, and was such an excellent likeness of the martyred President that President Hayes wrote a letter of commendation to the artist.

The history of the picture would indicate that it was fated to be linked with poverty. When Matthews painted it, his funds were low. He sent it to the White House, where it attracted considerable attention. When the artist's money was nearly exhausted, he removed the painting from the White House and was given permission to hang it at the Capitol.

He asked some friends to have Congress appropriate \$5,000 with which to purchase the portrait. A bill was introduced providing for the necessary funds, but it never passed the House. Discouraged because of his inability to sell the painting, Matthews removed it from the halls of Congress and kept it in his possession until he died, when it became the property of Charles H. Matthews, a brother of the artist.

The new owner was as anxious to sell the painting as his brother. He could not find a purchaser, but did succeed in using the portrait as collateral for a loan of \$500 made by Charles Featherstonhall, a clerk in the Pension Office. Matthews never redeemed the loan, and the picture is now in a cellar.

It is too large to be hung in a private residence and could only be used with good effect in a large hall or gallery. Members of the Illinois Legislature have several times proposed purchasing the portrait, but the negotiations never progressed far enough to gain an appropriation.

Washington, Times, Feb. 12, 1903.

12...
THE MASSILLON MUSEUM
MASSILLON, OHIO

September 15, 1944

Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Lincoln Lore
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Dr. Warren:

Your article about the Lincoln portrait painters was most interesting to me because of the mention of W. T. Mathews. Since you ask for information, can give you a little about him.

He was born in England May 7, 1821, came to this country with his family in 1823 and lived on a farm near this city for a number of years. He always considered Massillon his home and came here and painted every few years. We have the last one he painted in the fall of 1904, He was injured (run over by a cab) in Washington Dec. 25th of that year and died Jan. 11, 1905. He went to New York City in 1857 exhibiting at the National Academy each year until 1872 when we went to Washington where he became known as the 'Painter of Presidents'.

The Lincoln portraits he did were from 'solar-prints' of the Brady negatives lent to him by the Government. None were done from life. We have a photograph of the standing portrait of Lincoln that he did. It was in his studio at the time of his death and was



THE MASSILLON MUSEUM

MASSILLON, OHIO

"sold to a New York saloon keeper" when his estate was settled, trace of this is lost. In connection with this is the interesting story told me by his only pupil and one of the administrators of the estate. This portrait would be hanging in the White House today (instead of the Cogswell) had Mathews listened to the purchase committee. He was approached by them and told that if he would accept the \$10,000 and return to them the \$8000 (his price being \$2000) they would buy his Lincoln. He was most indignant, being very patriotic, he refused of course. I realize that this might put Cogswell in not too savory a light but it doesn't matter now and give it to you for what you may think it is worth.

The Corcoran Gallery owns a Garfield, Benj. Harrison, and McKinley by him. Two other Lincolns which we know about are one owned by the Union League Club of Chicago (could this be the Barrett) and one for the House of Representatives of South Carolina. This seems rather odd, but it is mentioned in an 1875 newspaper article. I had a soldier friend stationed there and asked him to look it up, but he was unable to locate it.

I remember the pleasant time we had in your city at the museum convention and seeing your collection which is truly remarkable.

Sincerely yours,

Albert C. Wise



September 19, 1944

Mr. Albert E. Hise
The Massillon Museum
Massillon, Ohio

Dear Mr. Hise:

I thoroughly appreciate your interest in submitting further information about W. T. Mathews, and your letter will make a valuable addition to our files of information about this famous painter.

If we are able to find any information about the standing Lincoln which he did we will be pleased to let you know as it is I'm sure comparable to the rest of the pieces of work which he accomplished.

Very truly yours,

LAW:vff

Director

1871, 1872

Dr. J. H. Smith
1871, 1872

I have been thinking of you very much lately, and wondering how you are getting on. I hope you are well and happy. I have been very busy lately, but I have managed to find some time to write to you.

I have been thinking of you very much lately, and wondering how you are getting on. I hope you are well and happy. I have been very busy lately, but I have managed to find some time to write to you.

Yours truly,
J. H. Smith

1871

1872

NEW YORK
PHILADELPHIA

PITTSBURGH
MILWAUKEE

GIMBEL BROTHERS

33RD STREET AND BROADWAY, NEW YORK 1, N.Y.

PENNSYLVANIA 6-5100

February 19, 1946

FEB 27 1946

Lincoln Nat'l. Life Insurance Co.
Fort Wayne, 1, Indiana

Dear Sirs:

We have in our collection, a full-size portrait of Lincoln, in which we think you might be interested.

It is: "Abraham Lincoln Holding the Emancipation Proclamation", by W. T. Mathew, American, 1821-1905, (was called Methews). Mathew painted a bust portrait of Lincoln from life in 1860, and it is possible this was also painted from life. The painting is fully signed, in a gilt frame, with the American Eagle at top. The price has been reduced from \$1498.00 to \$1122. This painting was acquired from the Walker Collection, of Minneapolis. We are enclosing a photograph herewith.

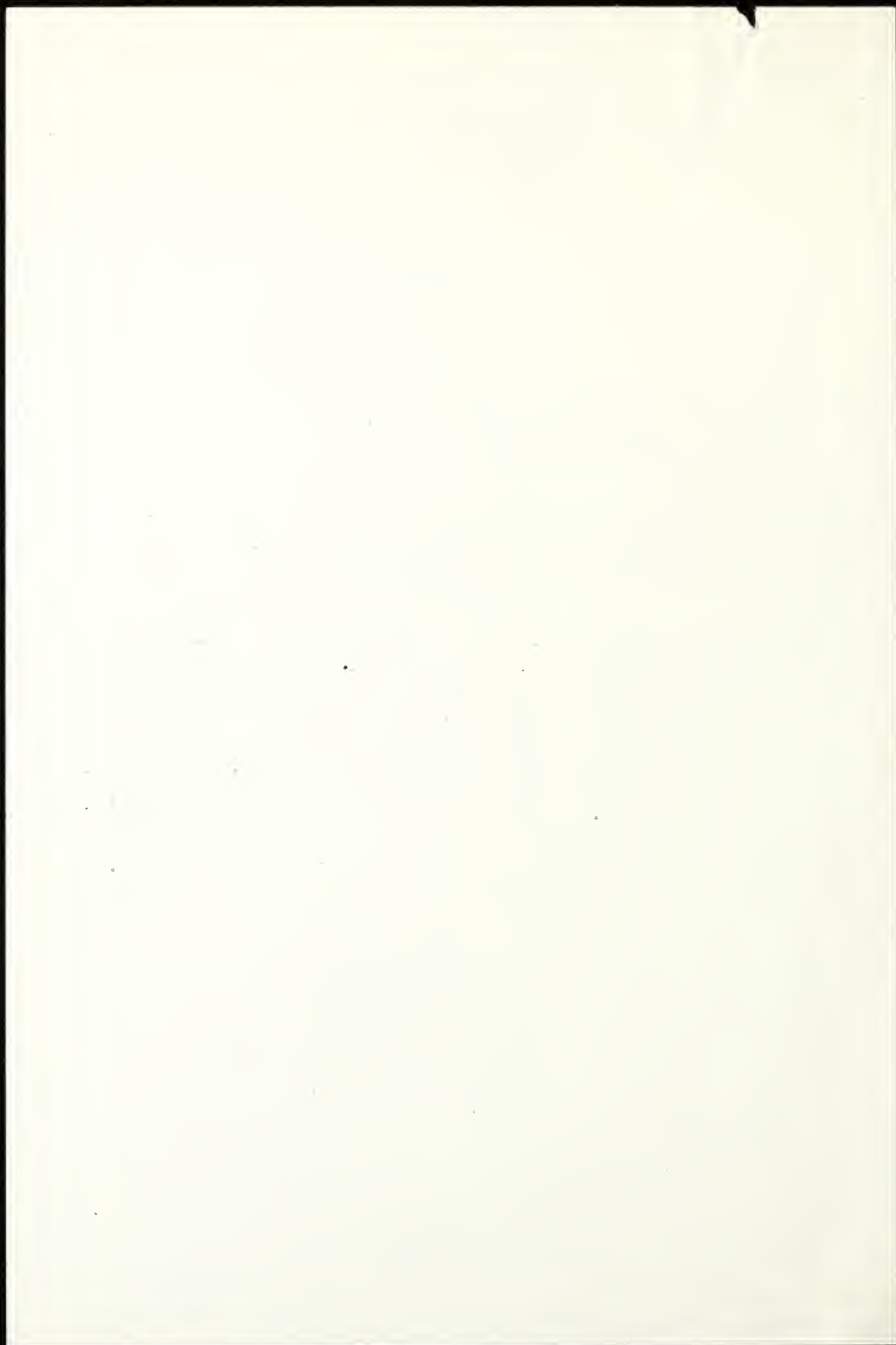
We trust that we may have the pleasure of serving you.

Very truly yours,

Victor J. Hammer

Victor J. Hammer
Art Collection
At Gimbel Brothers

VJH:BRS



March 15, 1946

Mr. Victor J. Hammer
Art Collection
Gimbel Bros.
33rd St. and Broadway
New York, 1, New York

Dear Mr. Hammer:

We regret indeed to reply to your letter of February 19 that about the time you wrote it we were in your store at Philadelphia and wish we had known of the painting at the time as we would like to have seen it, although I do not think we are in a position to acquire it.

Very truly yours,

LAW:EB

Director

MATHEWS'S PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN.

JULY 24, 1890.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed.

Mr. O'NEILL, of Pennsylvania, from the Committee on the Library, submitted the following

REPORT:

[To accompany H. R. 9857.]

The Committee on the Library, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 9857) providing for the purchase of Mathews's portrait of Lincoln, have carefully considered the same and hereby report:

That the said portrait is regarded by experts and by the old friends of Mr. Lincoln as one of the best which has ever been made. It is a full-length painting of life size, executed with great skill, and its accessories are all historically true. Mr. Mathews, the artist, belongs to the school of portrait painters which enjoyed the favor of the public before the advent of the art of photography and which has but few representatives at the present day.

Believing that the Government should be the possessor of this work of art, the committee recommend the appropriation of the sum of \$3,000 for its purchase, and amend the bill accordingly.

○

William
Matthews

U. S. Treasure Found in \$1 Junk Pile

NEWSDAY

12/34/78

By Susan Giller

Commack—Dena Fisher was used to bargain hunting at garage sales so, when she came across a big raggy canvas with frayed edges and chipped paint, she balked at the \$1 asking price.

"Take it for 50 cents," said the lady running the sale, practically throwing the portrait of Abraham Lincoln at her.

As Mrs. Fisher, the mother of two teenage boys, drove back to her Commack home with the rolled-up eight-foot by five-foot painting, she wondered what she would ever do with such a piece of junk.

Eight months later, she's still wondering, but she no longer considers the painting a piece of junk. The Smithsonian Institution says the portrait, which reportedly once hung in the White House, is worth \$15,000 in its present condition and considerably more if restored.

Mrs. Fisher would like to see the painting displayed in a museum where it would be appreciated but says she doesn't have the \$8,000 which the Smithsonian says it would cost to restore it and she can't find anyone else to restore it. The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery said its restoration funds are limited and a major New York art gallery told her the portrait's unusually large size would make it a risky investment



Newspaper Photo by Curt for News
Dena Fisher

for a private gallery.

Mrs. Fisher said she really doesn't want to sell the picture, which is being stored at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D. C., but would be willing to lend it to a museum on a long-term basis.

The canvas shows Lincoln dressed in a dark suit, standing against a wall and holding a piece of paper that Mrs. Fisher says looks like the Emancipation Proclamation. The signature of William T. Matthews is in the lower right-hand corner.

A fairly well-known but impoverished portrait artist, Matthews was born in Bristol, England, in 1821 and worked in New York in the 1850s and 1860s. His Lincoln portrait received considerable attention at the White House and Matthews received a letter of commendation from President Rutherford B. Hayes, according to a 1908 article in the Washington Times.

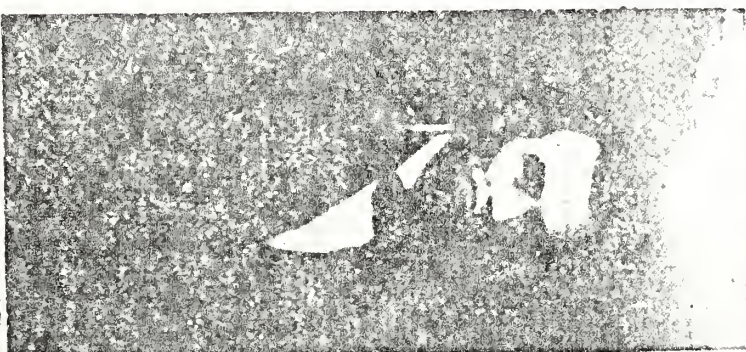
But Matthews removed the portrait and was given permission to have it hung in the U. S. Capitol. A bill was introduced in Congress to appropriate \$5,000 to purchase the portrait but it never passed.

Discouraged at not being able to sell the painting, Matthews removed it from the halls of Congress. He kept it in his possession until he died in Washington in 1905. The painting then became the property of Matthews' brother, Charles, who used it as collateral for a \$250 loan.

Since then, details are sketchy but Mrs. Fisher says the woman from whom she bought it said she had received it from a brother in England who dabbled in antiques.

Mrs. Fisher had the portrait shipped to the Smithsonian and, in August, was told of its value and historic importance.

"It's an icon, really. It says a lot about American art in the 19th century as well as saying something about Lincoln," said Ellen Miles, associate curator of the National Portrait Gallery.



AP Photo
William Matthews' portrait of Lincoln sold for 50 cents at a Commack garage sale.

26 Gehrig Street
Commack, New York 11725

January 30, 1979

Mr. Mark E. Neely, Editor
Lincoln Lore
Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum
1302 South Harrison Ave.
Fort Wayne, Indiana, 46801

Dear Mr. Neely:

We have recently come into possession of a full length oil portrait of President Abraham Lincoln, measuring approximately 8' x 4'. The painting is signed in the lower right hand corner by the artist, William T. Matthews.

Our local newspaper, Newsday, Long Island ran a feature about our portrait and at the suggestion of Mr. David Meschutt of Roanoke, Virginia we have decided to write to you about our find.

At present, the painting is at the Smithsonian Institute where a thorough research and analysis was conducted by Dr. Ellen Miles and associates. Enclosed please find a photographic copy of the painting together with various pieces of information sent to us by Dr. Miles. Also, we are enclosing a copy of Newsday's December 24th article. As you can easily ascertain from the photograph, the painting does require restoration, but in its present condition, has been appraised for \$15,000.00.

We feel that this painting of Mr. Lincoln is of significant historical value and should be again hung where it can be appreciated by all. Referring to the enclosed information, the painting did hang in the White House and Capitol. Also President Hayes did write a letter of compliment to the artist.

Being people of modest means, we ourselves are unable to have the painting restored. However, if some worthwhile institution were to undertake its restoration or secure funding for the restoration, we would be more than happy to lend this painting for a period of time agreeable to all.

If you desire to view the painting, we will be more than happy to arrange shipment from the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D. C. where it is currently being stored for us.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,


Mr. and Mrs. Irving Fisher

Enc.

LINCOLN COMES BACK TO GETTYSBURG

By John E. Stanchak

When William T. Matthews died in Washington, D.C. in 1905 he was 83 years old, bitter and destitute. Born in Britain, he had come to the United States to pursue his portrait painting art and in the course of years came to know the great and near-great of his time, immortalizing Presidents Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and McKinley on canvas. But the labor that perhaps caused him the most in grief, pride, and money was an 8-foot, by 5-foot portrait he painted of Abraham Lincoln. Thought lost for almost 75 years, it has resurfaced at last to enrich Matthews' reputation and the lives of a Commack, Long Island family.

In late 1978 Mrs. Dena Fisher of Commack attended a local garage sale and found Matthews' Lincoln portrait rolled up in a cardboard tube, the painting's edges frayed, its surface covered with mold and 176 small cuts. When she asked the woman who ran the sale how much she wanted for the Lincoln, she was told "a dollar." While she may not have been an art historian, Mrs. Fisher was surprised at the price and said, "a dollar?" The owner figured she wanted to dicker and obliged. "Take it for 50 cents," she said.

The questions that were put to Dena Fisher when she got home with the 8-foot Lincoln, were answered months later when the Smithsonian Institution informed her and her husband that Matthews' Lincoln, in its damaged condition, was appraised at a worth of \$15,000, and \$8,000 in repairs would bring it up to the rank of a priceless national treasure.

The Fishers, a typical suburban family, admitted they did not have the price of restoration for the Lincoln, but were eventually helped by Rudy Dengel, a 65-year-old East Hampton, Long Island art restorer, who took on the project out of a fascination for Lincoln. Dengel's final report on the restoration expressed his feelings on the subject. "The entire restoration took approximately 6 months, at intermittent times. There became a strong personal relationship between the subject, as he gazed down at the restorer, and the restorer's desire to bring him back as close as possible to the original beauty. . . . The restorer built up a profound respect for the artist Wm. Matthews and hopes that the restoration will carry this painting of our finest President into many future generations."

Dengel's growing relationship with the painting appears typical of the reaction it provokes in those who view it. "It's an icon, really," Ellen Miles, associate cura-

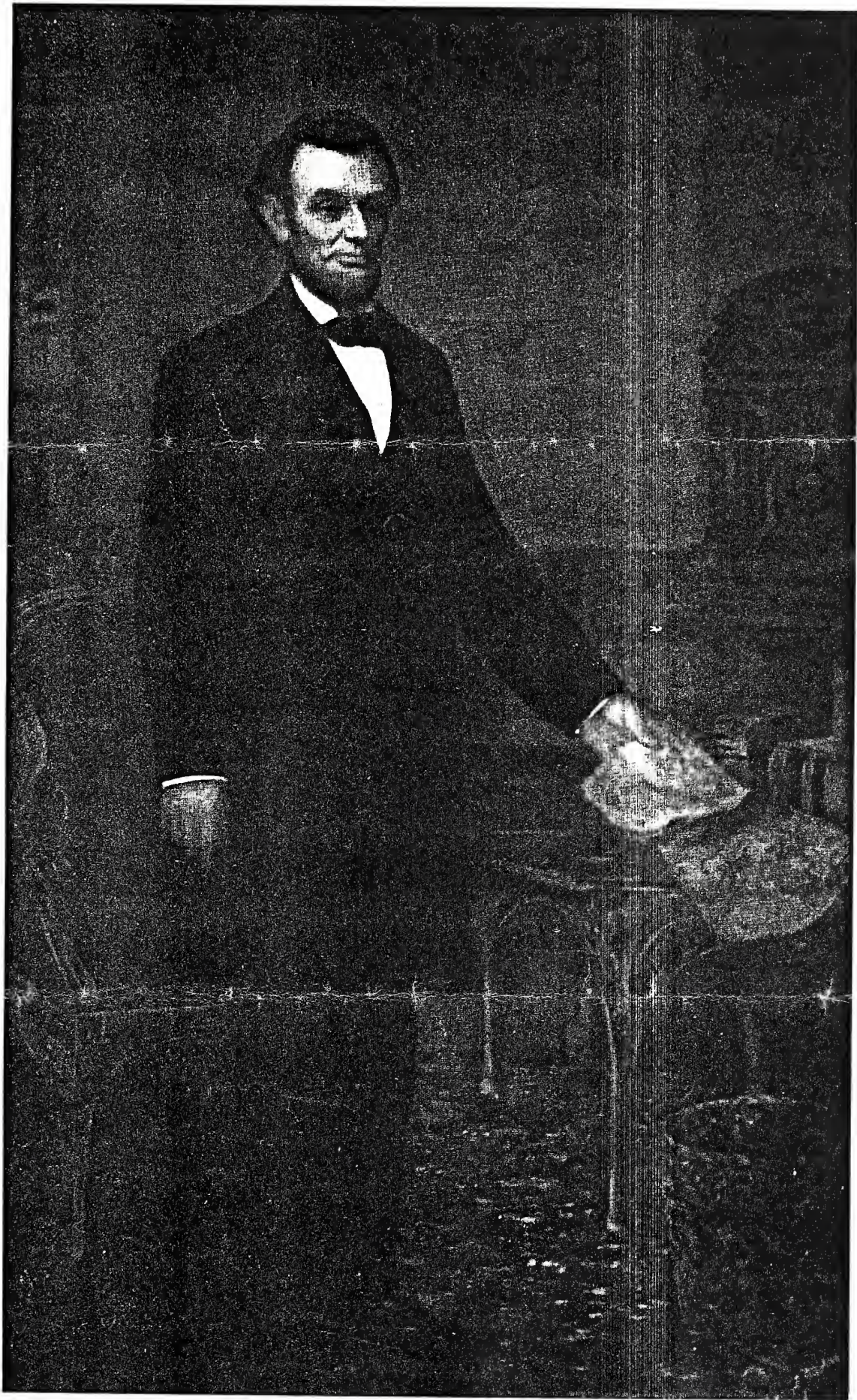
tor of the National Portrait Gallery, said. When interviewed by the Long Island, New York newspaper *Newsday* she pointed out, "It says a lot about American art in the 19th century as well as saying something about Lincoln."

Apparently, late-20th-century Americans appreciate Matthews' Lincoln portrait more than his contemporaries did. While President Rutherford B. Hayes thought enough of the portrait to display it in the White House and give Matthews a letter of commendation, that is about as far as the nation's gratitude extended. After being shown in the Executive Mansion for a short time, the artist secured permission for it to be exhibited in the Capitol building. It remained there while friends of the artist lobbied Congress to have that august body purchase the canvas for \$5,000. But a bill introduced to buy the Lincoln never passed.

Matthews removed the painting in disgust, and kept it with him until his death. At that point, the artist's brother Charles tried unsuccessfully to sell the canvas. Then finally, in reduced circumstances, he used the life-size Lincoln as collateral for a \$250 loan. Charles Matthews never repayed that loan and his brother's Lincoln portrait was not seen again until an American in England who bought and sold antiques picked the painting up. That American was the brother of the Commack, Long Island woman who decided to have a garage sale two years ago.

Too large and too valuable to be kept in their home, and with no space available for its display at the Smithsonian Institution, the Fishers were temporarily stumped over what to do with their newly restored treasure. But after a brief display at the Peter Noonan Gallery of Bridgehampton, New York they arranged for its display at Pennsylvania's Gettysburg National Military Park.

Matthews' Lincoln has traveled more in the past century than the 16th President did in his entire life-time, but with its display at the Gettysburg military park's Visitors Center, where it will remain on a ten-year loan, it will find at least a temporary home where it will be admired more than it ever was during artist William Matthews' troubled career. And in Commack, Long Island it will always have a place in the hearts of the Fisher family, who know its value can never be measured in dollars; and particularly nothing as small as fifty cents.



INVESTINART

136 EAST 57 STREET • NEW YORK, NY 10022 • 212-752-5307

*Marilyn -
file under
Mathews*

December 26, 1990

Mr. David D. Allen
Senior Vice President
Lincoln National Corporation
P.O. Box 1110
1300 South Clinton
Fort Wayne, IN 46801

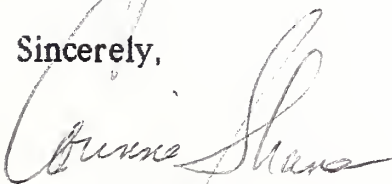
Dear Mr. Allen:

I have been in touch with Mr. Mark E. Neely, Jr. of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, who expressed some interest in the magnificent portrait of Abraham Lincoln by the great William T. Mathews, the portrait painting artist known for immortalizing such presidents as Lincoln, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison and McKinley on canvas. However, because Mr. Neely has not gotten back to us we thought we'd send you the enclosed on to you.

The portrait, which measures 8 ' 2" X 5 ' including it's gold wooden frame, has been on display in the White House as well as in the Capitol building. It is oil on canvas, painted circa 1870 and has an interesting history (after seeing this portrait President Rutherford B. Hayes wrote a letter of commendation to the artist).

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Corinne Shane
Enc.

MATTHEWS, WILLIAM T.

DRAWER 19A

4.4.1945-M

